

# ***Government House: An Allegory of the Interplay of Modernism and Tradition Within Australia***

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## **Introduction**

Government House, Sydney, constructed in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, represents a dual manifestation of the forces of tradition and modernism. The site demonstrates how, in the context of colonialism, the retention and expansion of tradition necessarily relies upon the characteristics of modernity, such as progression, as it seeks to transform and homogenize a new territory, to subsume it into an imperial power in the 'expansion of nationality' (Hobson 2011, p.4). Tradition may be defined as preservation of a way of life, the preservation of behaviour or culture. It exists when a 'belief or custom... is handed down through successive generations' (Nathan Tarcov 1986, p. 84) Modernism may be defined as the objective of progress, renewal and change. It is concerned with social, technological, scientific, artistic and political advancement, 'Modernism is supposed to be *new*' (Slote 2007, p. 233).

On the face of it, tradition and modernism seem to be mutually exclusive forces, incompatible, and certainly not contingent upon each other for their operation. However, the theme or trend of colonialism undermines this conjecture, highlighting the way in which its operation innately depends upon the presence of these two forces, which work collaboratively to achieve the imperial purpose. Government House represents the interdependence of tradition and modernism in relation to colonialism through the external physicality of the site, the use of the space provided by the site and the rationale behind the construction of the site. An analysis of Government House thus suggests that tradition and modernism may be inextricably linked, a dichotomy of two forces.

## **The Physicality of Government House**

The extrinsic physicality of Government House encapsulates the force of tradition on the one hand, and modernism on the other. Particularly evident in the gothic revival architecture of the site, the building itself resembles the grandeur of that of the imperial power, Britain. This is a product of tradition, an embodiment of the norms and styles of the colonizer, reflected by the new territory. This Gothic architecture was an established trend in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, 'During the early Victorian period, so called "Gothick" designs, based on medieval architecture became the preferred style for residences in England' (Hopkins 2009, p. 105), with this development 'symbolis[ing] a rejection of the formality of classic Renaissance architecture' (Hopkins 2009, p. 105).

Government House boasts various features characteristic of this style, as identified by Hopkins. The use of stone is a notable component of Gothic architecture, with this use

of quarried sandstone highlighting the affluence reminding of the vice regal significance of the site. The pointed archways, of which several appear on the eastern façade of the site, reflect this unique Gothic architectural style. Further, the obvious and abundant crenellation in the stonework is reminiscent of the defensive ramparts and battlements, which emerged in the medieval, Norman period, demonstrating a strong attachment to the contemporaneous state of Britain. The parapets similarly evoke a sense of combat and military dominance, with British competence duplicated by the colony.

British influence over the physicality of the House was inevitable, with Edward Blore, the architect of King William IV, who had been involved in the construction of several regal masterpieces in England, such as Buckingham Palace, commissioned to design a suitable residence for the governor. The use of stone is a notable commonality identifiable between Government House and other sites designed by Blore in Britain, with the decadent British taste reinvigorated in the new colony. The employment of Lewis Mortimer, a colonial architect, who modified the plans to suit the reality of the colony's terrain, suggests that European settlement was an unnatural phenomenon, implying the specificity of locale and population with the force of tradition. The installation of Government House on the banks of Sydney Harbour in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century is nonetheless a poignant example of the force of tradition in transporting practices and styles internationally, the House symbolizing the colony's increased conformity with the Empire, a 'revival of the beliefs and institutions' (Shills 1981, p. 1) of Britain.

Government House is equally the product of the force of modernism, in that it is symbolic of Britain's endeavour towards colonial expansion and 'progression without limit and without end' (Wright 2004, p. 6), which was 'the great promise of modernism' (Wright 2004, p. 6). First of all, the location of the site is symbolic of its function – to be the central point of government in the colony from which the representative of the monarch would operate. Therefore, the site's locality, being on the banks of Sydney Harbour, would have historically, and indeed continues in the present day, to visually remind inhabitants of Britain's occupation of Australia. However, this sentiment of achievement, boasted by the unmistakable and bold presence of Government House was not universally shared. Ross discusses the necessary paradox which underpins modernism, in that it poses questions and creates opportunities which inherently expose a benefit/ detriment dichotomy,

Everything seemed up for grabs with the elevation of human agency to the driving forcer of history and celebration of what seemed to be infinite potential for improvement. But the tensions among the competing versions of what counted as improvement and how it could best be achieved also produced massive conflict. They led at once to the horrifying excesses of industrial labor and imperialist exploitation... (Ross 2009, p. 5)

Modernism's obsession with progress and utilitarianism is reflected by imperialism, with objective reason 'becom[ing] an a priori good serving rather than critiquing the ideology of progress and human perfectibility, even when it resulted in human misery' (Ross 2009, p. 5). Government House is a symbol of imperial dominance, in its extravagance and in its wealth, served to contribute to this relentless goal of

progress. In this sense, the characteristics and the visions of modernism seem anomalous and inexplicable, with the value of the opportunities offered by it subject to what they can deliver to the each population. Therefore, Government House, its history and its context, demonstrates the way in which modernism was a positive force only for those whose voices were privileged by it.

From this discussion of the external physicality of the site emerges a palpable link between tradition and modernism. The construction of the site was a product of modernism, a symptom of imperialism, which grew from the need for a centre of government of the new colony. However, innate within this development were reflections of Britain recognizable in both the kind of government transported to the colony and the architecture of the site. Yet the physical presence of the site suggested dominance, discovery, improvement and progression, ideals of modernism. Therefore, Government House is equally a product of both forces.

### **The Use of the Space of Government House**

The mobilization of the space of Government house also reflects both modernism and tradition. The various rooms of government house serve to reflect British activities and requirements, and collectively demonstrate the permeation of traditional norms through the new colony. The way the space has been employed highlights the dominance of tradition in perpetuating normative ideas of how society should operate, in accordance with corresponding customs from Britain. Cianci and Harding discuss the idea that tradition promotes the preservation of certain practices, 'There is... also a strong concept of tradition which has retained its normative quality. Tradition in this sense is usually seen from the inside, denoting the construction of continuity that is established through cultural practices, rites and symbols, designed to counter change, decay and forgetting' (Cianci and Harding 2007, p. 14).

The main hall of Government House serves to illustrate this concept in terms of what it intrinsically suggests about British practice and how traditions are maintained by the decoration of the room. The size of the space reflects the affluence and decadence valued by European society and the decoration of the room with coats of arms of the Governors implies adherence to the European values of legacy and respect. This may be starkly contrasted with, for example, Aboriginal culture, which prohibits any viewing of a deceased individual. Similarly, the study represents academia and knowledge, pursued by British society, and this particular room further demonstrates the pervasiveness of Gothicism beyond the architecture, also manifesting in the interiors of the house. Further, the dining hall is further essentially a symptom of replicating the British value of hospitality and gastronomy. The use of dark colours complies stylistically with the early Victorian period, transferred from Britain, and the original decoration of the room with portraits of the Royal family infers loyalty and reverence to the Imperial power, evidenced by the desire to replicate the patterns and customs of it.

Moreover, the Ante Room houses a chandelier which was originally lit by gas, demonstrating the way in which technology and modes of living were, as other practices, developed in England and transferred to the dominion. It is crucial to

understanding Government House, and the maturation of the colony generally, to note that this transmission was not frozen at the point of settlement, and that improved communication facilitated continued interaction with the innovations emanating from Britain. The ballroom is another significant space, used for entertaining guests and for leisure, reflecting the relevant style of dance and music customary in Britain. Also used for formal ceremonies, affixed to the room was a stately, official function, once again replicating British custom in this sense. Finally, the service wing highlights the way in which the socially acceptable British practice of employing servants was absorbed by the colony, with discursive conceptions of the role of a servant reflected in the inclusion of the kitchen and the laundry within this wing. The use of the space itself thus demonstrates how Government House reflects the cultural background and forces of its founders, which had a substantial influence upon the fabric of the site.

Although less noticeable than the influence of tradition in dictating how the site of Government House was to be used, modernism fundamentally premised the existence of the Government House, that is, without imperialism, a modernist concept, the territory could not have been colonized by Britain. The decoration of the site with artwork capturing the local landscape, and more pertinently, the local indigenous population therefore suggests a celebration of accomplishment and of progress. Chambers discusses an irony specifically associated with the relationship between modernism and colonialism, ‘the "modern" is not simply the growth and "advance" of the West, something we now know well. The modern was produced through an interaction between West and other, a process whose product was then used, retroactively, to name those very categories of difference.’ (2002, p. 2) Essentially, this statement explains how the existence of modernism and the way in which it has been used to privilege the “superiority” of the west is contingent upon the presence of the “other”, of a group distinct from the is modern, and then how the comparison between the west and the other is used to distinguish the latter from the former. The paradox lies in that, without the “other”, there is no benchmark available for the west to call itself modern.

This concept is reflected in the artwork historically selected for display in government house. As mentioned previously, the site featured local artwork, as identified by Callaway,

One of the earliest of the Macquarie commissions was John Lewin’s Transparency made for the ballroom at Government House in honour of the Queen’s Birthday on 18 January 1811. The *Sydney Gazette*... reported: “the north end [of the ballroom] was covered with a transparent painting... the subject local, and the design peculiarly appropriate, being the representation of our native race in their happy moments of festivity, contrasting in silent admiration their amusements to the recreations of a polished circle; and instead of expressing dissatisfaction at the humility of their condition, earnestly anticipating the blessing of civilization (2000, p 11).

Considering the dependence of the west on the “other” in its formulation of modernism, this account encapsulates the necessary presence of the Aboriginal population for the British to consider themselves modern, progressive and more advanced than the race of the annexed territory. Therefore the display of such images in Government House showcased the influence of modernism on the site, in that it was a necessary condition to its existence, and consequently the site celebrated the territory it housed the government for. The images also depicted a comparison between the colonizer and the colonized, which provides the former with the belief in its modernity.

The use and decoration of the space in Government House therefore reinforces this relationship between tradition and modernism in the parameters of imperialism. Tradition pervades the space, evidenced by the utilization of the rooms and the way in which these were decorated to display a certain reverence to Britain. The force of modernism is also abundantly recognizable in the extent to which features of colonialism inform the decoration of the house, particularly in terms of the artwork, which visually distinguishes the indigenous population from the British, portraying the latter as modern.

### **The Rationale Behind the Construction of Government House**

The forces of both modernism and tradition similarly underpin the purpose for the establishment of Government House. The site was constructed as a vice regal centre of government, created to imitate similar environments in Britain, and in this sense, a product of tradition. Government House served as a site from which the monarch could exert authority and control over the dominion, with this influence administered by her representatives. Hobsbawm’s articulation of the definition of tradition accords with this concept, finding that it is,

A set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviors by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past.... Tradition is the invention of a past whose contiguity is established through facts and answers to new situations which take the form of references to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition (2001, p. 67).

The notions of inculcation of values and responsiveness to novel circumstances are particularly relevant to the imperial origins of New South Wales, which clearly influenced the rationale underpinning the construction of Government House. The site may be considered a facet of the British objective of inventing itself and asserting its presence in the new colony, as if the territory had always belonged to Britain. As Gascogne writes, ‘It was as if European settlement in Australia was “born modern” and the world which the colonists made was new and brightly lit.’ (2002, p. 14) Replication of the British way of life in the new colony, evidenced by the introduction of government, the legal system and social realities as they existed in Britain, serves as an answer to the novel conditions of the colony, with this response necessarily

referring to the operation of the corresponding frameworks of the imperial power. Spearrit comments upon the continuation of the links to Britain, 'Sydney's convict and imperial origins were much in evidence at the turn of the century... A British-born and British-appointed governor ruled local society from Government House, a gothic edifice above the Fort Bennelong tram depot.' (2000, p.2) In this way, the purpose for the construction of the house was influenced by the process of tradition, in that Government House was the product of a transmission and reinvention of values and an attempt to preserve certain practices in new circumstances, with these values and practices deriving from Britain.

Modernism similarly infiltrates the rationale for the construction of the site, in that the progression achieved by colonialism required accommodation and centrality. Government House served as a point of correspondence with Britain, and, as mentioned previously, an access point through which the monarch could influence the dominion. Therefore, its existence is inherently dependent upon the modernist values of imperialism, including progress and improvement. According to Friedman, 'Modernism is state planning. Modernism is totalization, centralized system. Modernism is the Enlightenment's rational schemata. "Progress"--"Science"--"Reason"-- "Truth." Modernism is the ideology of post-Renaissance modernity-- conquest--and the inscriptions thereof.' (2001, p. 494) Government House reflects this definition as the symptom of imperial endeavours, the impetus of this being the desire for progress and knowledge.

This demonstrates the way in which tradition and modernism mutually formed the basis for the construction of Government House. The modernist notions of imperialism and progress created an opportunity for the reinvigoration of British traditions in the new colony, with Government House constructed as means of linking the monarchy to the colony, and as a centre for governing the new territory with reference to the style of government as it operated in Britain, thus embracing both modernism and tradition.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of colonialism, modernism and tradition operate in conjunction to achieve imperial goals. Modernist values, including progression, improvement and expansion, are used as vehicle for extending the influence of an imperial power, which is accomplished by the imposition of the tradition of this power upon the new territory. Consequently, modernism and tradition underpinned the colonization of New South Wales, and therefore the forces synchronously founded the site of Government House.

## **Notes on Contributor**

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